CHAPTER ONE

REGION AND RELIGION: RECONSTRUCTING MAHARASHTRA

1. Geographical and Linguistic Boundary
2. Physiography and Polity
3. Bhakti Movement
4. Brahmanic Institution and the Warkari Movement
5. Marathi Literature
6. Warkari Forms
   Conclusion
REGION AND RELIGION:
RECONSTRUCTING MAHARASHTRA

Regional studies have constituted a very important building block of historical analysis. For about last one decade regional studies have made a real headway, particularly in the Medieval Indian context. This is an attempt to look at Maharashtra as a regional identity, which arose out of the weakening of the Mughal authority. It is in this context that this study looks at Maharashtra as a linguistic-cultural unit rather than as a mere conventional treatment along geographic and administrative divisions. The region, thus, is differentiated more along language, culture, social relations and conventions over and above the crucial aspects of geography and topography. There is no denying that geographical aspects have greatly influenced the life of the people of Maharashtra, and accordingly has shaped the social and political arrangements of the region. Since this chapter delves into some formative stages of the growth of regional identity, it equally looks up the regional identitie's affinity with the concept of 'community'. Considering that there does seem to be some important attributes of Marathas emerging as 'community' by around 17th century, it then becomes pertinent here to have a look at the initial stages of the 'region' as well as its proximity with the concept of 'community'.

There are certain characteristic axioms for the classification of regions along historical, linguistic, cultural and socio-structural variables. The concept of structural variables, seems to me, fairly applicable in the context of Maharashtra as it takes into account the objective as well as subjective factors (ideology). Apart from the complex of socio-economic and political relationships, we also need to go into the linguistic-cultural aspects, which can impart a specific and distinct identity to the people living within certain confines of geographic-inquistic boundaries. Here, language, culture and a feeling of shared historical experience, are the important components to see the region's ideology in the form of regionalism; and certain common elements along its drive into the sense of community. It is this very aspect which will be dealt in the entire thesis along with social and political arrangements in understanding the historicity of region' and 'community' in the Maratha context.

This chapter first goes into the discussion of geographical features of Maharashtra to determine the geographical 'frontier' in its internal composition of the region prior to 17th and 18th centuries. The notion of 'frontier' will be evident in the discussion of subsequent

chapters in relation to the Maratha's movement beyond Maharashtra as well as the cultural creativity which went a long way in building up its relationship with the outsiders, and also the understanding of 'frontier' in the realm of culture. The singular linguistic - cultural aspect and the interaction of various other factors certainly provide important components of the 'individuality of region'. The aspects of geography, religion, culture and polity not only provide a thread to understand the concept of 'region' and 'community', but become intimately intertwined with each other in having a broader perspective of a region.

It has been generally observed that the terrain in Maharashtra shows considerable homogenity, being equally divided between upland plateaus and lowland valleys. The rocky and mountaneous character of the region seems to have served as sanctuary and shelter for the Marathas. It has also made them sturdy and strong, resulting in the type of military organization which they used with such devastating effect against the Mughals. Although there also seems to have been considerable geographic variations, but despite that the land remained more or less the same.
Geographical and Linguistic Boundary

Maharashtra, in a literal sense, is called as a great Rastra or nation founded by a race of men who in ancient times were probably known as Rattas or great Rattas. The language spoken by the people was known as Maharashtri, a form of Prakrit dialect. Thus it remained a Marathi speaking land. It, however, seems difficult to map out the region before the inscriptional evidence of the 7th century. In fact, Maholeska (Maharashtra) figures in the narration of the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim, Hsuen Tsang, during this period. But we hardly witness the development of a definite linguistic region in relation to the development of Marathi prior to 800 A.D., which went up in its formative phase till 1300 A.D. It seems that the word Maharastra first occurred in the writing of Vararuchi, the Prakrit Grammarian in his Prakrit Praksha. He deals with its grammars in details and records only the salient features of the other Prakrit languages but referring Maharastri with a remark "sesam Maharastrivat". We further find the use of the term in the Brihatsamhita of Varahamihira, who lived in the 6th century A.D. But it is from the Aihole inscription of 7th century


38
A.D. that we get an idea of the expanse of Maharastra. It states that Pulkesin II, the Chalukyan monarch, was the lord of the three Maharastrakas, probably Karnataka, Kuntala and Maharastra and of the 99 thousand villages and the town. In the same century HiunTsang records 'Mohalacha' as the area lying between Khandesh in the north and Satara in the south. However, it was the widespread travelling of Chakradhara, who's journey gives the extent of Marathi language's use. It looks that the people regarded Maharastra as co-extensive with the area of Marathi as a spoken language.

It seems pertinent now to have a look of Maharashtra's boundary in older times as in the subsequent centuries under the Muslims and the Britishers, the historical geography was considerably conditioned by the physical features of the land.

Maharashtra has been a part of the peninsular India and was included in the comprehensive term Dakshinapatha, the limits of which varied from time to time. Similar is the case with the English word introduced to refer to the peninsular part, the Deccan, translated as "South". It is an old term and had its genesis in the Vedic literature and

5 Ibid, p. 224.
the Mahabharatha as "Dakshinapath". The triangular portion which juts out into the sea like an inverted mountain peak suspended from the line of the tropic of the cancer, is known as the Deccan; Maharastra is the part of the Deccan. These two terms, appear often in this whole thesis to show the geographical interaction and individuality of Maharashtra.

So the great peninsular south of the rivers Narmadha and Mahanadi was known from Vedic times as "Dakshinapatha". Maharashtra remains the one integral part out of this rocky regions forming the peninsula. The main characteristic feature of this place is the great mountain ranges which enclose it on two sides - the Sayadri range, running from the north to the south, and the Satpura and the Vindhya ranges running from east to west. The other minor ranges break out in rugged outline from the mountain chains and from the watersheds of many rivers eventually falling into the Godavari and into the Krishna. This typical characteristic gives the whole country an appearance of ruggedness and unevenness. In particular, Western Ghats bristle with hundreds of hills and forts. The broken and contorted land writhing from the rugged and intended sea margin shoots aloft in steep and terrific cliffs and craggy
summits forming natural fortress. They bid defiance to the foot of man and horse. The continuous rainfall in the Jungles made warfare truly difficult.

The Maratha land was a short of triangle of which the Shyadri range and the seas, from Daman to Karwar, form the base; the Satpura range form the perpendicular size, reaching to the east beyond Nagpur as far as the watershed of Godavari and its tributaries. In fact, the geographical features also reveal that it was vulnerable to invasion from both the sides - south and north. The distinct physical regions of Maharashtra was further apparent in its three principal divisions: the Konkan, the strip between the Shyadri and the sea, the Ghatmatha, the country on the top of the ranges, and the Desh, the area lower down the valleys.

Konkan is located down the great chain of mountains. It is composed of laterite soils washed down from the Western Ghats. While marine marshes lies at the western edge, and one can see the rising Shyadri ranges on the eastern edge, it is also known as Western Ghats. The hilly tract seems to

---

8 M.G. Ranade, Rise of the Maratha Power (Bombay, 1900), p. 20.
be interspersed by huge mountains and thick jungles, further intersected by rivers and innumerable rivulets, rocky and clear until they descend to the sea level where they are affected by tides. The table-land or Ghatamatha extends from Junar to Kolhapur; and it rises from the Konkan coast. This tract almost abounds in wild beasts. This area is known for hill forts built by successive local and regional powers. The forts have played a very crucial role in Maratha history. They have protected the naturally defensible position of the country. The third, the Desh, lies beyond the Ghatmatha. The study is concerned about this particular geographical area. It is a vast tract that extends from the Shyadri in the West to the river Wainganga in the east. The major portion of the Desh is spread over the areas, covered by the Purna-Tapti valley, the Godavari Valley and the Bhima and Krishna valleys. The Krishna river valley remains the most important settlement site as well as the sacred place Pandharpur being the part of this site.¹⁰

The land generally remained salubrious of the entire peninsula? The country equally remained divided between the bracing and good climate, making it considerably distinct from the northern plains. The Marathas who reside in the extreme west of Maharashtra, within the main range of the Western Ghats, and in the extreme north of Maharashtra near

the Satpura mountains, are blessed with unfailing rainfall and regular seasons. However, the people away from these main ranges, are troubled with variable moisture and uncertain seasons, frequently, too, with alterations of draught and flood. Periodically they are afflicted with scarcity, and some times by severe famines. 11 Apart from this, the place is watered by many rivers namely: Tapti, Godavari, Bhima, Krishna, Wardha and Wainaganga. The main rivers, the Krishna and Godavari, have contributed greatly to the neighbouring states as well. The Krishna basin provided Shivaji with a strong army, while the basin of Godavari was also identified as the holy home of Maharashtra.12 The rivers had many temples along its banks and ghats.

Thus, the geographical frontier in its internal composition seems to be the large tract of western India known as Maharastra, extending from the Arabian sea on the West to the Satpura mountain in the north, and comprised the modern tracts of Konkan, Khandesh, Berar, part of the provinces, the British Deccan and about a third of the Nizam's dominion, the whole being known as Marathawada. The Maratha country remained strategically very important as


12 G.S. Singh, Maratha Geo-politics, pp. 2-3; also see I. Karve, Maharashtra: Land and its People (Bombay, 1976), pp. 4-11.
well as highly picturesque. Much of the land lies in the bosom or near the skirts of the Ghat mountains.\textsuperscript{13} The land, hence, between Narmada and upper Krishna practically was identified with the Marathi speaking people, and appears to have formed a solid linguistic as well as geographical block.\textsuperscript{14} The peculiar geographic formation of the land along with its rocky terrains, deep valleys and impergnable hill-tops, equally provided the region with strong defence and certain important characteristics in the form of self-reliance, courage, simplicity etc. Although this Marathi speaking land of the Deccan Plateau was gradually parcelled out among the Sultanates of Berar, Ahmadnagar, Bidar and Bijapur, but Maharashtra made its boundary quite apparant with the arrival of Shivaji, despite remaining in the midst of some Deccani Muslim kingdoms.

**Physiography and Polity**

As it is evident that the people of this land were known in the early ages as Ratthas, who subsequently got divided into several sub-tribes or families such as Satvahnas, the Bhojas, the Mauryas, the Kadambas, the Silharas, the Yadavas, the Chalukyas, the Rashtrakutas, the Parmaras, etc. Some of these families were able to carve out their power and authority. They also popularised art and

\textsuperscript{13} Temple, opp.cit, p. 344.

\textsuperscript{14} G.S. Sardesai, opp.cit, Vol. 1, p. 18.
architecture. The Marathas, similar to Hindus in other parts of the country, were divided into various castes and sub-castes. The etymology of the Marathas remains uncertain. The term does not indicate a social caste, or a religious sect. It seems to have included the people of all races residing in the region of Maharashtra, both high and low caste Hindus. But the Maratha is also indicated as a name for a particular caste. In Maharashtra when the word is used alone, it refers to the Maratha Ksatriyas of the 96 families. However, according to V.K. Rajwade, "those born in Maharashtra are called as Maratha corrupted into Marathas." In this second sense the term Maratha then refers to any inhabitant of Maharashtra, but is then usually used in conjunction with some other word. Thus, a Maratha brahmin means a brahmin of Maharashtra, as distinguished from brahmin of Gujarat or Telangana. The Marathas were endowed with noble tradition derived from their royal ancestors such as the Mauryas, the Rastrakutas, the Chalukyas and the Yadavas. "The Marathas possess plain features, short stature, a small but wiry frame. Their eyes are bright and piercing and under excitement will, gleam with passion." The Marathas were brought up near around the Western Ghat mountains and their numerous tributaries, thus

they posses all the qualities of mountaineers.\textsuperscript{18} The neighbourhood of dense forests, steep hill sides, offers enough facilities to display their valour and warrior like character. The Western Ghat is also important in the sense that they nourish a resolute, endearing and audacious spirit among their inhabitants. The very strong character and resoluteness made them capable of defying the threats posed by Muslim rulers several times. This could be also due to the fact that the lands of Maharashtra has been dominated by a population where the Aryans and the Dravidians have been mixed in due proportion.\textsuperscript{19} The Aryan element includes in Maharashtra a due mixture of the first settlers, as also the subsequent Scythian invaders. The non-Aryans similarly include the aboriginals, Bhils, Kolis, and Ramoshis and other lower social groups.

Prior to the arrival of Shivaji, we hardly find any ruling group to cover the part of peninsula known as Maharashtra. It had dispersed and varied authorities represented by various families namely Morays, Shirkes, Yadavas, Nimbalkar, etc. Most of them generally were subservient to the Deccani Muslim kingdoms. Many old Maratha families, such as the Shirkes, the Morays, the Nimbalkars,

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, p. 339.

\textsuperscript{19} M.G. Ranade, RMP, pp. 20-21; also see I. Karve, Kinship Organisation in India (Third edition, Munshi Manohar, Delhi, 1990), p. 175.
the Ghorpades etc., had received grants and favours from the Deccani Muslim kingdoms. Several families attained high positions in army and royal court under Bijapur and Ahmadnagar kingdom. However, there did exist a term called 'Maharashtra' in the cultural or more pointedly in the linguistic sense from about 13th century A.D. onwards. Although Maharashtra certainly witnessed the political dominance from the Mauryas till Yadavas, which stretched over till 15th centuries. It was around 14th century that we witness the Muslims penetrating into the Deccan region. In fact, the historical story of Maharashtra begins with Alauddin Khalji's invasions. It took the Muslims not less than thirty years before they could have any strong impact over the Hindus. The subjugation was never completed so far as western Maharashtra and Konkan are concerned. Konakan remained out of Muslim influence till the middle of the 15th century, and the Ghatmatha, or the Mavals were never conquered in the sense in which the Desh country was brought under Mohammdan influence. The western part remained relatively immune from the Muslim influence, particularly in terms of any change in the habits and the language of the people. But in the centuries preceding the arrival of Shivaji, the political set-up of Maharashtra was considerably affected by the Muslims. The early plundering activities of the Muslims in Maharashtra was followed by conquest, annexation and the extinction of the Yadava dynasty. Later, we also witness the emergence of Vijaynagar dynasty as well
as Bahmani dynasty. The Bahmanis ruled over Maharashtra for about a century and a half. This kingdom later split into five independent principalities headed by Muslim Shahs by the end of the 15th century and a half thereafter (1490 A.D. to 1650). The presence and existence of various ruling dynasties for over such a long period of time was very crucial in defining the paths of social mobility, areas of government and patronage, military and civilian bureaucracy, their cultural assimilation, the impact of their political set up over the Maratha institutions and administration.

Although there had been frequent changes of dynasties and rulers, but the cultural continuity was never disturbed. The language kept developing. It acquired the Devnagri script and developed its own literature by the 9th century. In fact, it clearly seems that a geographical and cultural unity in the form of Maharashtra survived despite continuous political and social flux, apart from a linguistic sense of the region quite apparent in Marathi maturing with the passage of time. It is further apparent in a passage from 13th century history endowed with enough of regionalism. "Maharashtra is a land with a population of 600,000. In this country, there are wise and learned people, and the wisdom embodied in the Vedas and Shastras has a place of honour in the land. The rulers of Maharashtra are noble persons and their language has a grace of its own....Desh is one region. From Phaltan to that part in the south upto where Marathi is
spoken, is one tract which in the north is terminated in the Balghat range. All this is another region. Then the land on the two banks of Godavari is one more region, the Godavari valley. From this to Mekhar Ghat area is still another region. This entire region was known as Maharashtra".20

It was the people from the Maval region, who, due to their physical features, provided the real military base for Shivaji to launch a powerful political movement. They provided simultaneously a social base for Shivaji to create a political identity of Maharashtra. In the century preceding the building up of Maratha power, Maharashtra was devoid of strong cohesion and was greatly dispersed and disjointed in terms of its political base in nurturing a sense of 'region' as well as 'community'. But with the commencement of the 14th century and the continuous raids by Muslims, the princes and families of the Maratha territory became bit provincial. These Muslims raids, in fact, were able to wield people together in their defence. They gradually got attracted to the cult of local saints, followers of Krishna and teachers of salvation through discipline and sacrifice.21 The strengthening of the


21 The Marathas were feeling clearly threatened due to the growing strength of the Muslims in the region, and bakti provided a spark to counter the growing influence, see M.G. Ranade, R.M.P. and N.K. Bhere, The Background of Maratha Renaissance (Nagpur, 1946).
incipient monothestic tendencies in Hinduism, with the emergence and wide spread influence of bhakti in the case of Maharashtra also contributed to the growth of Marathi literature, which will be discussed later. The Marathas seem to be putting a wedge against the dominance of Turkish rulers to have their own politico-cultural identity along the line of Hinduism. They seem to have greatly derived their strength from the continuity of deep founded tradition and the solidity of physique and character due to their physiographical features.

**Bhakti Movement**

This chapter further moves on to look up one of the most important ingredients of Hinduism - the bhakti movement, particularly in the context of Maharashtra, to see how the brahmanical institution, a vital element of classical Hinduism, was trying to readjust itself under the barrage of reformist movements in Hinduism. And, how far the relationship between brahmin and king, well embodied in the classical Indian texts, show the pattern of power in 17th and 18th century Maharashtra? The most important point to be discussed in relation to the bhakti movement is: in what way did it contribute to the growth of a sense of community identity? Although the chapter looks up the initial stages of these questions, but the discussion is equally well evident in subsequent chapters. This exercise is well
intended to see the religio-cultural aspects of 'region' as well as 'community' along with its coordinates of power and authority. It is evident that a plethora of earlier writings done by communalists and nationalist historians\textsuperscript{22} have been greatly marginalised in later writings. It, however, seems that certain explanations in earlier writings do have historical rationality to see the issues in its particular milieu. It is this very drive which propells me to give a different twist to some of the well belied assumptions in understanding the religio-cultural dimensions of state formation in the 18th and early 19th century Maharashtra. The important questions underlying the discussion will be why the notion of Maratha identity emerged only around the beginning of the 17th century? What were the religio-cultural factors which went into its construction? The discussion of the bhakti movement is intended to look at seemingly separate issues of religious dimension and critique, and its response to the brahmanical tradition as well as its relationship with the form of kingship.

Maharashtrian life since early times seems to be considerably underpinned by religious forms and idioms, apparent more from 13th century onwards. Their religious attitudes and behaviours were certainly tailored along Hindu

\textsuperscript{22} Well shown in M.G. Ranade, opp.cit, p. 10-11; G.S. Sardesai, New History of the Marathas,Vol. I, pp. 35-37, and many other writings.
faith and ceremonies. With the decline of Vijayanagar empire, a so called Hindu empire,\textsuperscript{23} the Marathas emerged out to be yet another state which greatly championed Hinduism as a form of faith against the increasing Islamic influence. Richard Temple remarks about the Marathas, "They are Hindus, but their Hinduism is held to be of a non-Aryan type. They are sincerely devout in religion, and feel an awe regarding "the holy Brahmins", holding the life and the person of a brahman sacred, even though he be a criminal of the deepest dye. They of course regard the cow as equally sacred. The Marathas generally follow Shiva and his wife. All classes, high and low, are fond of the religious festivals, the principal of which, "the Dasserah", occurs in October".\textsuperscript{24} Most of the ruling dynasties of Maharastra were under the influence of one or the other deities. They performed many religious rituals to seek legitimacy to their rule from the common masses. Often they patronized saints, pirs and poets to be into the good estimation of the people. Many sacred places, right from the Yadava period, were the constant feature of religious life of Maharastra. The period of Shivaji equally saw strong religious orientation of the Maratha state with its full blown up form visible during the Peshwa period at Pune, resulting in thoroughly

\textsuperscript{23} B. Stein has talked about Vijaynagar at length, in The New Cambridge Published Series, Vijayanagar (Cambridge, 1989), see Introduction.

\textsuperscript{24} See Richard Temple, Oriental Experiences, p. 343.
brahmanised culture. Princess and prominent families lavishly donated land grants to the temples and brahmins. However, the religious life of the rulers, particularly from the Shivaji period onwards, was a curious blend of secular and sacred ambience of the medieval politics. It may show the common form of medieval society and politics of early modern Europe as well, but the religiosity of rulers in Indian context seems more to do with Indian tradition than anything else. In the pre-industrial context Patricia Crone speaks that the monarch was often required to protect the religious establishment and promote the divine order, not just in the general sense of righteousness, but also in the specific sense of religious law and morality. Infact, this very religiosity in Indian context is equally tied up with the issue of king in his relationship with brahmins, and King vis-a-vis Dharma. This aspect recurs often in my thesis to show the flexibility and adaptiveness as well as the resilience of the tradition in its relation to power and authority. Although the best part in the case of the Marathas seems to be a strong sense of coexistence with Islam, but a strong assertion of their faith in building up their own politico-cultural as well as religious identity remained dominant throughout their existence. Their religious attitude had its manifestations in many forms, apart from the bhakti movement which contained in

itself a set of religious ideas. The very religious bent of mind in Maharashtrian context does not indicate that the Hinduism here took something of a very distinct flavour unlike the prevalent form of Hinduism all around. But the subsequent discussion in this chapter as well as the later chapters will certainly show that the regional undertone was well beneath the Maharashtrian form of Hinduism. Possibly this very drive to orient and reorient tradition made the Marathas most enduring regional identity to consciously put a check on the cosmic authority of the Mughals.

Here, I intend to discuss about the brahmins and brahmanical institution, particularly in the context of Maharashtra so as to gauge their influence in the society and their attempts to hegemonise the various aspects of social life which had strong bearings on Indian society. This discussion will equally point out the relationship of brahmins with king or political authority in subsequent discussion of issues relating to power and authority. The brahmanical tradition was getting exposed to counter cultural movements from 7th century onwards. In what way bhakti movement in particular did away with the brahmanical institution to bring in the sense of oneness or humanism irrespective of caste, creed, community, sect, etc. is


54
central to the discussion. How far the bhakti movement subverted the hegemonic position of brahmins in society to make each caste and group equal and nurture a sense of identity - be it of 'region' or 'community' as the interrelationships among the saints-poets point to the growth of regional identities. This discussion on bhakti movement also points out the role of tradition in providing a critique to the hegemonic traditional institutions, particularly the brahmanical tradition. Jayant Lal points out that tradition is that in which the experience of all past struggles is kept alive and incorporated. It remains accessible as a source of inspiration for collective social action under appropriate conditions and through contextualised reinterpretations. 27

By around 7th century, the medieval Hinduism was under devotional transformation. It received its initial impulse of transformation from the bhakti movement. The bhakti, a Sanskrit noun, is derived from the verb bhaj, meaning broadly "to share, to possess", and occupies a semantic field that embraces the notions of "belonging", "being loyal", even "liking". 28 The grammarian Panini speaks that


even in the early period the word's most important usage was in the domain of religion\textsuperscript{29}. Bhakti, which implies "devotion" or "love" in later literature, is one of the central concepts of Hinduism. It describes that side of Indian religion in which the personal engagement of a devotee with a personally conceived divinity is understood to be the core of religious life. It arose from Tamil land in the 7th century, gradually spreading to north India, Bengal, Karnataka and Maharashtra by the 15th century. The Tamil culture played a very crucial role in making it all-encompassing emotional reality. This very emotional texture, along with its social and spiritual values, brought about remarkable changes in the quality and structure of religious life. From ritual observance and the performance of prescribed duties, or alternately, ascetic withdrawal in search of speculative knowledge of the divine, the heart of religion became the cultivation of a loving relationship between the individual and a personally conceived supreme God.\textsuperscript{30} Salvation no longer remained the preserve of the upper castes but became prerogative of all, and vehemently attacked mindless ritualism of the brahmanical tradition or Pandits to bring about simplicity in one's religious life. It led to the proliferation of vernacular languages or

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}
regional languages as the saint-poets of this great tradition composed the devotional songs in their respective languages to attack brahmanical Sanskrit language. This very growth of vernacular languages all around India resulted in giving regional orientation to the regions, like Sikhs, Marathas, Bengalis, etc.; while in their devotional practices, the bhakti followers strongly attacked all forms of worship and brahmanic temple rituals.

Bhakti, as we know, expanded into a big movement and touched almost all the religious aspects of believers, transcending on the way the barriers of castes, creeds, community, etc. However, "equality rather than hierarchy among all believers, was a common theory and in almost all these movements the devotees finally had to sort themselves into jatis (endogamous castes) and to act like other jati members in their local order."³¹ It was the saints and poets of this tradition, of Hindu and Muslim origin, who were mainly instrumental in spreading the message of bhakti through their regional languages to all parts of India. The thematic and stylistic rites that draw together bhakti poetry from all parts of India cannot be gainsaid. In every region, bhakti literature contains songs that express a visual fascination with God and songs that bemoan the

³¹ There is a cross-regional survey of the bhakti movement in History, see Elanor Zelliot, in Bradwell L. Smith, (ed.), Hinduism (Leiden, 1976), pp. 143-160.
deity's absence and invisibility. The north and west are also distinguished between poets who adopt a saguna (with qualities) approach, god conceived in the form of images; while the nirguna believes in formless worship of god or (without qualities). The devotees greatly differed also in their devotion, some devoted to Krsna, some to Siva, some to Vishnu or some other goddesses also. Although there were many points of differences between south and north Indian sant traditions, as well as institutional division; but the spiritual unity in their teachings binded them together. Each regional bhakti movement shares something in common with others, but none two seem to have identical attitudes, influences or histories.\textsuperscript{32}

There was one very important thread of the bhakti movement, resulting sometimes in the growth of new structures articulated well into the emergence of Sikhs and Marathas as communities by around late 17th century. The north-south ties reflect the areas position as a crossroad region as well. Despite having differed along vaishnavite or shavite forms, as well as along shaguna and nirguna forms, the bhakti movement certainly made a strong dent into the brahmanical Hinduism. It certainly provided the base for the common masses to realize God at the individual plane and get away from the ritually oriented traditions preserved by the

\textsuperscript{32} Elanor Zelliot, \textit{opp.cit.}, p. 144.
brahmanas. But the question remains that did it really get away with the brahmanical order, and did they really put down the varna system of Hinduism? It is in the case of Maharashtra in particular that I have attempted to answer these questions while continuing with the broader theme that the bhakti movement has played a crucial role in providing the religious as well as cultural base in reorienting their power and authority from Shivaji onwards, despite bhakti remaining a dominant form of critique of the brahmanical institution.

Brahmanic Institutions and the Warkari Movement

A brief discussion of the conditions of brahmins and brahmanical institutions will provide some clues to understand its relationship with the emerging bhakti movement of the time which was the most potent source of critique of brahmanism. The lineage-clan obligations and corporate corporations between different jatis seem to have remained the main basis of social order. With the shaping up of peasant economy after the Gupta period, the village emerged as the focal point in Maharashtra. The jati system became the primary basis of interaction, emerging out of occupationally specialised, endogamous corporate groups. The social order, in fact, started revolving around the village-vatan-jati nexus of institutions since early medieval
times. Brahmanism gained its ascendance out of its placement in Varnashram Dharma with its crucial claim of brahmanic superiority. Varna system made its deep dent into the Indian society as well as Maharashtra. The medieval transformation of brahmanism with its contemporary features, seems further to have incorporated a range of Vedic as well as popular terms and beliefs combined with a more sophisticated religious theory which acquired a much higher degree of acceptability for itself. The varna theory, with its crucial claim of brahmanic superiority became quite powerful through its demand for fabricated genealogies mostly sought by the aspiring chieftains and the priestly brahmins. Brahmanism found its base in Maharashtra due to its drive to provide legitimacy to the aspiring persons for power. Brahmanism with its Pan-Indian character, gave the principle of bhakti a prominent place, despite bhakti remaining a dominant form of critique of the brahmanical institution. Bhakti, however, had its appeal more in the subaltern classes as it represented the dreams and whims of the people in their belief of Bhagwan and the urge for a strong personal devotion. The believers of the bhakti

tradition accepted the brahmanic appropriation of its message as a promise of its fulfillments in a distant heaven, difficult to achieve in one's own life time, as long as the social practice remained the communally established practices. The village chief, later called Patil, came from the big house hold, the regional chieftain came to be called Deshmukh. The Brahmin officials associated with them as accountants, bankers or tax collectors came to be known as Kulkarnis and Daspandes. Thus, the life of the village people seems to have gradually came into closer contact with brahmanism through these brahmin officials. As the purveyor of revenue collection and accountants and keepers of land records, they simultaneously controlled the acts and practices of secular knowledge. These brahmins were also found to be controlling the sacred-secular knowledge of seasons and weather conditions through their mastery of the calendar. Their knowledge of history and genealogies of elite households was politically crucial. They were also involved in explaining and justifying the mysteries of natural and social disasters, the miseries and injustices. They gradually got grip over the externalities and the shared world-view through their knowledge of texts, interpretation and rituals of Varnashram Dharma.

These internal beliefs, behaviours and practices of brahminism found its reflection in various ways. The most important and common was an attempt to return to the older, more familiar folk remedies, prayers, rituals, deities and beliefs, which considerably enhanced the income of the priestly brahmins. The other significant issue was that of looking for an alternate life style which meant a partial or total renunciation of socially productive life. Brahmanism responded to such things through the unification of rituals within the Vedic-Puranic system for those who were still willing to believe in their healing powers. Brahminism bluntly ignored the counter cultural alternatives whenever such movements found to be challenging the existence of well rooted institution, it sought the strong arm of the state and ritual power to force them into remote oblivion.38

It was to counter the pervasive nature of traditional religion along with its theological obscruantism and rampant ritualism of brahmins that we witness Maharashtra, like other parts of India, was greatly swept up by the influence of the bhakti movement, known here as the Warkari movement. The Warkari followers devoted themselves to Lord Vishnu in attaining one's own salvation. They worshipped Vishnu in his incarnation of Krishna, and became exclusive devotee to Lord Vithoba of Pandharpur. Its first exponents were "those who

38 Ibid., pp.22-24.
rebuilt the cause of some strains in their inherited purity." They were joined by a spectacular array of rebellious ideas from a number of dependent castes. The bhakti movement challenged the brahmanic interpretation of the relation between man and God. The Warkaris stressed increased personal devotion to feel the pulse of God. They were represented by large segments of the dependent castes. This representation of bhakti unfortunately did not mature into its proper form, otherwise it might have flaunted the false patrimonialism of the Maratha elites along with its brahminic legitimacy. The more significant aspect of the movement, apart from its attack on brahmanism, resulted in the growth of Marathi literature against brahmanic Sanskrit literature, and also brought about certain flexibility into 'Maratha' as a category.

The Warkari movement had its centre at Pandharpur (in Solapur district) a town on the lower reaches of Bhima river. The sect is called Warkari because of its annual pilgrimage by (Waris) which meant wanderers. They went to the cult of Vitthal or Vithoba. The origin of the cult of Vithoba is shrouded in controversy. Although the religious life was characterised by many traditional cults

39 M.G. Ranade, opp.cit, p. 15.
for the common people in Maharashtra, especially Rudra-Shiva, Khandoba, Bhairwa and others. Mahalakshmi of Kolhapur, Khandoba of Jejuri, and Bhavani of Tuljapur were very famous deities among Maharastrians. But it was the Vitthal of Pandharpur which had wider appeal among the Maharastrians. However, the cults of pastoral castes were not abolished, but superseded by the Warkari devotion to God Vitthal. Folk religion, in fact, emerged as one of the important constituents of Hinduism.

The religious movements had one main source in common: an unorthodox form of Tantric Yoga, preached by the so-called "Goraknathis" or "Nath-Panthis" yogis. Although this famous icon - the God Vitthal at Pandharpur, seems to be a Kanerese deity. Though the Warkaris themselves consider Jnandeva as the head of their lineage, textual criticism does not warrant their claim. More likely, the head of the lineage was Namdev, a contemporary of Jnandeva, who was instrumental in propagating devotional Vaishnava bhakti, the cult of God Vitthal from 14th century onwards.

The image of Vitthal seems to have no grace of form and elegance. The worship is nothing different from the commonly performed practices in any Hindu temple. However its distinctive character remained the special song

services, the kirtans and the bhajans conducted for hours at Pandharpur and other centres of the cult (e.g. Alandi, the Samadhi of Jnandeva and, Dehu, the birth place of Tukaram, both a few kilometres off Pune). The worship involves listening to and singing of the exertions of some famous preachers or Haridasas, which are based on the verses from such great saint poets as Janeshwar, Namdev, Eknath and Tukaram. These kirtans left its intense emotional impact on the multitudes gathered in eager expectations at the holy places. This movement, having its origin in the 13th century, has an unbroken tradition and produced a number of scholarly saints and poets. In the Maharastrian tradition, the 'Sants' and 'bhaktas' are also called as Vaishnavas. The sants are the members of the Vitthal Sampradaya and the followers of this Sampradayas are 'devotees par excellence'. The warkari sants appeared to be more or less heterodox. The orthodoxy in a Hindu context may be defined in terms of an acceptance of the authority of Vedas and the brahmanical tradition as a whole, the sants thus appear as some kind of heretics. The saint-poets of this sampradaya remained rooted within the Hindu folk, as though they adhered to Vedantic tradition or the authority of Vedas, they only occasionally paid lip service to it. But, the

42 M.S. Mate, Temples and Legends, pp. 209-12.
43 G.S. Ghurey, opp.cit., p. 220.
44 R.D. Ranade, Mysticism in Maharashtra (Poona, 1933), p. 42.
attack on brahmanism being the main element then becomes somewhat paradox. The first saint poet of this tradition Jnaneshwar (an outcast brahmin) writes a commentary on Bhagvat Gita in 1290. Since the Bhagvat Gita upholds the four fold division of society, so, the opponents of Jnaneshwar claim that his choice of that text meant the adherence of orthodoxy. But Lele rightly points out that Jnaneshwar's attempt is "an attempt of a critical reappropriation of tradition that is encompassed synthetically in Gita."\(^ {45} \)

**Marathi Literature**

The bhakti movement had tremendous contribution in the growth of Marathi literature. The earliest Marathi work is Viveka-darpan and the Gorkha-gita, written by Mukund Raj, who preceded Jnaneshwar, and belonged to Nath tradition. But it is Jnaneshwar's Bhagwat-Dipika, which is supposed to have laid the foundation of the growth of Marathi literature.\(^ {46} \) The main feature of this work is the use of Prakrit and Marathi. Janeshwari became the main source of inspiration for the "Bhagawata" or "Vaishnava" literature in Marathi. Janeshwar was followed by a host of other saints and poets namely, Chokhamela, Bhanudas, Namdev, Tukaram and Ramdas.


\(^ {46} \) S.G. Tulpule, *Classical Marathi Literature*, p. 314.
Few of them like Eknath wrote Chauhsloki Bhagwata, Rukmini Swayamvara, Bharata Ramayana. Eknath also wrote a great deal of what might be described as folk literature. A considerable number of mystical literature in Maharastra was written by the low-caste poets, who are subsumed under the ranks of the "Sants", "Vaishnavas" or "Varkari". Their teachings were later enclosed in the abhangas in large numbers. Abhangas composed by Tukaram had a tremendous popularity. But a kind of break seems visible with the arrival of Ramdas. Ramdas did not belong to this tradition but evolved his own sect known as Samarth Sampradaya. Ramdas, alongside his Dasa Bodha, has written a lot of miscellaneous episodes, abhangas, aartees, slokas and ashtakas. Of all his writings, the Dasa Bodha is the most important which also has been called as an encyclopedia.

It's forms and styles of dealing with the topic is not very systematic. All sundry topics right from how to improve one's handwriting to, how to achieve absolution through being with the almighty, are treated in it. Marathi was further enriched by two yet other types of poems, the Lavani or love songs and Powdas or historic ballads. The Powdas

---


48 See once again J.E. Abbott, Ramdas, Translation of Mahipati's Santa vijaya (Poona, 1932).

49 See the Preface of V.S. Kavinde, Dasbodha, By Swami Ramdas (Nagpur, 1963), pp. 5-16.
generally remained the songs of the wandering bards or Gondhalis. The Gondhalis, as the bard of the goddess Bhavani, became extremely popular among the Marathas. The growth of oneness and commonality was strongly imbued in the songs of wandering bards, or the historic ballads.

However with the arrival of Shivaji and particularly of the Peshwas, Sanskrit again started coming into vogue as is clear from the Sanskrit seal of the state of Shivaji, the Sanskrit Rajya-Vyavahar-Kosha was compiled during his time. There is no denying the fact that the bulk and variety of Marathi literature greatly increased during the swarajya period but at the same time it inclined more and more towards Sanskrit. The Marathi of this time lacks colloquial forcefulness of Tukaram and Ramdas and the linguistic identity of Jnaneshwar and Eknath. Thus Marathi as a language started taking shape from about 10th century A.D., but it had to travel through various phases to give proper forms and structures which later seems to be drifting in a different form. The growth of Marathi literature was considerably boosted by Mahanubhava Sampradaya as well, a contemporary of Warkari movement. B.G. Gokhle also points to the fact that the saint-poets of the bhakti cult enriched

50 Acworth, Ballads of the Marathas, p. 27.

Marathi literature, "by transcribing the ancient vedantic tradition in its multifaceted manifestations and articulating devotional ardour for a loving God, transcending the limitation of caste and breathing an egalitarian spirit into the tired hearts". 52

Warkari Forms

The Warkari movement had its wide social base as it recruited its followers and leaders from widely varied castes. Although brahmins seem to be the dominant among its leaders and middle to low castes generally remained the followers. The followers of Warkari tradition were persons who were alienated from the rigid four fold varna system, which had scriptural sanction, but was impervious to any change whatsoever, thus fostering acute discrimination and inequality in the society. The Warkari movement found its roots mostly in the lower sections of society. Some Warkari leaders like Danyandeva and his brothers were brahmin outcastes, humiliated by the orthodox brahmans; some others like Eknath and Bahinabai were liberal brahmins persecuted for being so. Namdev, the first known leader of the movement, had to apologise to the arrogant brahmans for preaching his new ideas. Tukaram was persecuted and tried

because though a shudra he assumed the religious leadership of his time.  

Warkari practices to a great extent exposed the latent vices of the brahmanic tradition. They did not renounce the daily social life, rather the rules and rituals of their personal spiritual activity were intended to facilitate full and active participation in whatever productive activity they found good and legitimate. The followers remained fully involved in social life and subverted the constantly appropriated premise of brahminical tradition. It seems clear that Warkari marginalised the external authority, magic and miracles; its severe criticism of mindless rituals, and esoteric practices indeed brought about a significant change in the crisis-ridden society. They carried a strong element of protest, but despite all these, they seem to be greatly embedded in the same social structure of their time as they could hardly do away with the vices of brahmanism.

This movement with its stress on the pilgrimage to Pandharpur twice in a year, brought about homogenity amidst a heterogenous population. The yearly pilgrimage to Vitthal on foot created a strong sense of identity among the Maharashtrians irrespective of castes, sects and religion as

---

well as among the non-adherents of this Sampradaya. Rande also opines that the bhakti movement transcended caste and class lines, and was in the fullest sense an upheaval of the whole population, 'strongly bound together by the common affinities of language, race, religion and literature and seeking further solidarity by a common existence'. This thus proved to be a binding force as it integrated various diverse faiths and beliefs into one.

A brief discussion on the Warkari movement was intended to show how within this movement Marathi as a language was taking shape within the writings of saints and poets. The another significant element of this movement was that it stood against the brahmanic superiority. However, it remained embedded in its own structure unable to blow away the vices of society and the brahmins well hegemonic position. It was infact a mystic and devotional movement which certainly brought about other left out streams of society into the play of history. The bhakti movement was in constant conflict as well as in dialogue with the main moorings of Maharastrian Hinduism. The saint-poets, of both Hindu and Muslim origin, carried out a common base for prayer and worship. The Islamic idea of brotherhood greatly affected the bhakti followers.

---

Conclusion

Thus, the Marathas seem to be well into the formative stage of emerging as a regional power. They certainly found endowed with some important components of regional identity, well reflected in the geographical 'frontier' which they possessed with the arrival of Shivaji. Out of their gradually shaping geographical boundary, they seem to have acquired certain important physiographical characteristics which filled in them the sense of chivalry, warrior like character, etc to fight out any odds on the way to acquire the distinctive regional colour. However, what seemed to be significant and important was the religiosity of the masses, compounded further with the growth of the bhakti movement or Warkari Sampradaya in the case of Maharastra. The Warkari movement certainly seems to have provided a short of space upon which each individual of the region felt getting away from any internal blocks and constraints. The continuous invocation of God and his relationship with men by most of the saint-poets brought about high sense of morale code and conduct as well as belief in deep and strong sense of humanism. The saints binded together everyone into the chain of love and respect and made the people realise the dignity of one's individual self. By placing enough stress on Vedas and Puranas, the virtue of brahmins and the sanctity of temple, they regenerated the faith of the people
in gradually receding Hindu Dharma and tradition. The sense of awareness and commonality in the religious attitude proved to be a real plank upon which they seem to be developing the thread of ‘community’ as well. There was a rational explanation in making the people part of the society and equally a firm faith in the basic quality of men. They invoked enough in people to gain salvation by giving up false class values and caste-ridden mentality. Bhakti movement may not be very different from other parts of India, but it certainly acquired some regional overtones with the passage of time, well evident in the later discussions as well. If bhakti movement’s contribution in the growth of Marathi language is quite significant, than its articulation of Hinduism is equally very important in understanding the Maratha’s drive to represent Hindu tradition and faith in a much more domesticated form with continuously spreading Islam in the region. Bhakti movement may not have dealt a blow to the brahmanical order, but it certainly uplifted the masses on the periphery to become the part of history. The very survival and changing attitude of the brahmanical tradition shows its resistance in the midst of crisis, and its root in the Indian tradition that ‘kingship’ itself became the conjoint authority of king and brahmans relationship. This will become more clear in the chapters ahead. The discussion on bhakti movement is
intended more to see the base of 'region' and 'community' then to merely look up its later contribution to the growth of Shivaji's political movement. Infact, this chapter provides a backdrop to some of the important threads stretched out from here to have its manifestations in various forms into the later chapters.
GEOGRAPHICAL FEATURES:
Maharashtra

Source: G. S. Singh, Maratha Geopolitics & The Indian Nation (Bombay, 1996)